

Toddler groups a how to check list!

If you are reading this, it may be because your church is thinking about starting a baby and toddler group- Congratulations. In my experience, no church has ever regretted this decision and it really is outreach in the very best sense of the word. As you prepare to welcome families and their tots, here are a few tried and tested stages to get you started. I would suggest you have a preliminary chat with your Elders / minister to ensure you are encouraged and will return with your plans for mutual support with the project.

Stage 1- Planning – You need to pause the excitement button and look at what else happens in your locality. Are there already a host of toddler groups and when do they meet? No one wants to run a similar group on the same day and time. (You will find many families are Toddler group groupies and will attend more than one).

Stage 2- Volunteers – No group ever functioned well without help, so how many volunteers may you need? A simple rule of thumb is help will be required to set up your session and tidy up each time the group meets (these do not need to be the same people- you may be able to set up the evening before etc). Folks to help with refreshments is great as the tea pot always needs filling! It is so helpful to have a few volunteers happy to chat to families. Remember this may very well be the first time some families have made contact with a church, so the team need to be flexible and display the very best of what being a Christian means. Your actions will make for a happy place to be and return to. Depending upon your local situation you may need a volunteer to play doorkeeper, car park attendant etc. While you will work as a great team, you need to have a named leader... and a deputy for when the leader's absent. This does not need to be too formal but it's always good for everyone to have a central point of contact.

Stage 3- Where - So far so good. You will be only group in your locality meeting at that time, and you have a huge team of volunteers! Now what's next?

Where? – Where do you plan the group to meet- Church hall. In church or a small room?

Take a step back and ask the following questions:

- Is there space for pushchairs? Might there be steps which are an obstacle for buggies and tots?
- Are there toilets and baby changing facilities close by? When a toddler needs the toilet, they usually need to go NOW!
- How big is the room? It may seem huge now but toddler toys take up space
- Have you got room for toddlers to play and new babies to have their own safe space?

- Is there room to safely serve refreshments? We all love baptisms but not with hot liquids!
- Is the room fit for purpose – no trailing wires, stacked chairs or tables; it is not where the tins of paint are stored, or the church vacuum cleaners / lawnmower are stored? (believe me it happens).

Stage 4- Spread the News – What are you going to call the group and how are you going to tell people? Banner outside, huge sign on Church noticeboard? If you can, use social media and set up a Face book page or link to an existing site. Leaflets to hand to people, in the local library, coffee shop, baby clinic Ask local nurseries / primary school. Once you're established, your best advert will be your families .

Stage 5- Equipment and storage- All great so far... now for the fun bit! You will need a range of toys suitable for birth – 2yrs. I would suggest the following

- Appeal to any families you already know – please ensure all toys need to be safe to use, no sharp corners or missing pieces etc.
- Apply for a grant from your church or Synod – be realistic and ensure you explain that this is for the wider community too.
- Local charities and private nurseries often have surplus equipment and may pass great items on to you.
- Best advice is to start small and grow. Ensure your equipment can be cleaned thoroughly and easily as you will be surprised how many items a baby sucks and chews on!
- If you're creating a baby area, you need soft rugs, mats and toys such as rattles, activity centres and things that move.
- You may want sit and ride toys for the toddlers, along with jigsaws, cars, room for a slide or a play tunnel?
- You also need to factor in nappy changing mat, plastic spout cups and plates for refreshment time. You may need your own mugs, kettle, and tea, coffee biscuits etc.

You also need to think how and where this can be stored – if it's in a shared cupboard, try to be as tidy as possible and label your equipment. Tidy boxes are great and make the carrying in and out easier for your team. Yes, I know a 6ft slide is great but if your storage is akin to a wardrobe it's unlikely to happen immediately. Who knows, in three months you may have a huge walk in cupboard when the church realises the value in having a toddler group!

Stage 6- Refreshments and costs- You can be as generous as you are able to be, given your own circumstances. You will know what works where you are, but here are a few ideas:

- Juice / water for toddlers – mums often bring their own

- Tea/ coffee for adults – good to have some decaff as breastfeeding mums often don't want caffeine. If possible, use Fair-Trade.
- Biscuits – you can add to this fresh fruit – be mindful of choking hazards e.g. whole grapes (cut grapes in half lengthways to make them safe) Some groups like to add in small rice cakes, sliced cucumber, slices of banana. – you may find your local supermarket will partner with you and offer you fresh fruit – always worth an ask.
- Cost – It is your decision as a church if you wish to have a charge or not. A token charge of £2 per child is fair and usually ok with most families. Please never allow cost to be a barrier for anyone.
- Your church may be very generous and not charge you for hire of space, use of heating and electricity etc but as your funds grow you can quickly consider a donation to the church.

I hope that your plans flourish as you grow in number, fellowship and discipleship. Here are a few final thoughts:

- Keep a register of your families – if any family misses a few weeks make contact – they may really value your kindness if a child has been poorly etc.
- Ensure you have a simple contact form for your families to complete – you may need to ring/ email them if a session needs to be cancelled due to weather, heating failure etc. You will need permission to collect this data- Ask your Safeguarding rep, Elder/ Minister for advice.
- It is good to know when the children attending have a birthday, they are very special occasions when you're little.
- You may wish to mark birthdays with a card and or small present or Bible story book. Remember to include all children. Always keep a spare should a new child arrive that day.
- Celebrate church festivals Christmas, Easter, harvest etc. The Bible Society do full colour story books for Christmas and Easter. If ordered in bulk, they are very reasonable in cost.
- Regular updates to the church Elders' meeting, church magazine etc are good and as a church we love to share what happens in the building during the week with our Sunday congregations.
- Try to ensure that the books, materials and language you use reflect diversity and inclusion

Keeping Safe

- It is a good idea to have someone trained in First Aid if this is not possible always make sure you know where the First Aid kit is and record accidents for your groups records when they happen.
- It would be good to speak to your Safeguarding church rep for a basic starters guide and regular updates- this is to keep **YOU** safe.

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